

Transformed by Love

Pentecost 12 – 24th July 2011

Readings:

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52 & Genesis 29: 15-28

I should imagine that many of you here in church have taken some sort of pain relief in the past month. It's a thing we do. We have a headache and we pop a pill. We sprain our ankle and we reach for an anti-inflammatory. And in much more serious occasions pain relief and management is a vital part of treatment for those who suffer from a cancer illness. And then there are psychic illnesses, the pain of the soul, that we have also learned to dull with anti-depressants. So pain relief is an integral part of 21st Century living and many of us benefit from the advances in this area. Pain relief has enhanced our living.

But like most things, pain relief also has its drawbacks. Often the pill we take for relief in one area masks more serious pain in another area. Health professionals are well aware of the dangers, and whilst I would never advocate a stoic "grin and bear it" approach, perhaps we are becoming a people who feel the need to banish all pain, all discomfort. The dangers are most clearly seen in those with the disease of leprosy, where the body no longer feels pain and dreadful things happen when it receives an unfelt injury.

Pain, physical, psychic, or societal is there for a purpose and if we want things to change at a underlying level it pays not to mask or ignore it.

Pain is there to tell us that our body, our psyche, our society needs to change and when we ignore the pain, real destruction is sure to follow.

In recent months, we can see the results of avoiding pain in societies that need to change. Politically, in the Spring Uprisings in the Middle East we see a direct result of ignoring long term pain. Economically, in Greece you see a people determined not to change - seeking to ignore the necessary pain needed for economic transformation. Pain is always necessary for change and transformation, and such things never come easily.

And so we come to today's gospel about the kingdom of heaven and specifically the two parables from Matthew 13: 44-46. These are the ones about the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price. In both these parables we have an individual determined to attain something of great value.

And what do they each do? That's right, they sell all to obtain the item so dearly desired. They sell all - and Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like that. Now this is not economic advice, about cashing in and making a killing. We're talking of the kingdom of heaven, an experience not a place where God is. We are talking transformation. We are talking about a radical change in our living, by divesting ourselves of all that hold us back from attaining the pearl of great price and the treasure in the field - the experience of the kingdom. And that is never brought about by business as usual. So it is with spiritual transformation.

In another place Jesus talks about the same thing - the need to lose one's life to gain new life. The metaphor in John's gospel urging us to be born anew is talking about the same thing. And perhaps that metaphor is best suited for this morning's sermon because any birth story entails pain. Any mother can tell you that in birth first comes the pain and then the joy of new life. So gaining the kingdom, the pearl of great price, the treasure in the field will mean transformative pain.

And at the heart of Christianity there lies a story of transformative pain - the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. A life much like our own filled with joys and pains, losing his life in such pain so that we might see a better way, and finally experience in resurrection the joy of transformation living.

But we do like our comforts? As individuals, as a church, as a society? So the great barrier to attaining the pearl of great price is our unwillingness to endure the pain of transformation - no pain, no gain! The treasure in the field remains buried because we are unwilling to risk a new beginning. And who can blame us if we are comfortable. But often we are not, so we reach for the pills instead of seeking transformative change. We live with our fears, and hark back to better times, or comfort ourselves in the material world, ignoring our spiritual well-being.

And perhaps that is at the nub of the problem. We don't see the value in transformation. It is too much to ask, and maybe the kingdom, the new life on offer, we feel is not worth it, after all it is hidden.

But the answer to that is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. There we see the results of a transformed life. And it is love that brings about the transformation. What does John tell us? That God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes should not perish but may have eternal life - and that's not heaven sometime in the future, it is transformation now. Love brings about transformation.

And that's the connection with our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. If ever there was an individual needing transformation it was Jacob. Here we have a person who cheats his way into an inheritance that belongs to his brother. And having succeeded in getting what he wants, he finds no peace. He goes on the run. But the cheater is cheated, his uncle Laban tricks him into an extra seven years of labour so that he can finally marry the one he loves. His pearl of great price is Rachel and he is willing to give up fourteen years of his life to attain that pearl. In a real way it is love that transforms the self-absorbed Jacob, not his earlier meeting with God that we read of last week. Love changes everything.

But let me finish with another story of how love transforms. It's the story of Dulcinea. Can anyone tell me who Dulcinea was?

(Story 220 in *A World of Stories* by William J. Bausch)

The musical "Man of La Mancha" is the story of the ridiculed Don Quixote who lives with the illusion of being a knight of old, battling windmills that he imagines are dragons.

Near the end of the musical, Don Quixote lies dying and at his side is Aldonza a seemingly worthless prostitute, whom he has idealized by calling her "Dulcinea - Sweet One", much to

the howling laughter of the townsfolk. But Don Quixote has loved her in a way unlike anything she has ever experienced.

When Don Quixote breathes his last, Aldonza begins to sing "The Impossible Dream". As the last echo of the song dies away, someone shouts to her, "Aldonza!" But she pulls herself up proudly and responds "My name is Dulcinea." The crazy knight's love has transformed her.

Love changes everything.

Love is the treasure, love is the pearl that is there if we risk everything. And how our individual lives would be changed, how our congregations would be changed and how our world would be change. And it all starts within ourselves, for the treasure has been planted there.

Rev Tony Duncan

24th July 2011

[*pilgrim.tony@tassie.net.au*](mailto:pilgrim.tony@tassie.net.au)